



The Saga of Saving and Reconstructing

RAMSAY HOUSE

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Ramsay House, located at 221 King Street, is a cultural icon in Alexandria, generally referred to as the oldest house in the city. Today its distinctive outline is a symbol of the historic heritage of Alexandria. It currently is the city's visitor center and offices for the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association. [Illustration #1] The route to becoming a cultural icon took more than ten years and was a torturous path filled with numerous threats to demolish the building. By the time the building was reconstructed in 1956 it was more a product of the early years of the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg than a typical Alexandria Colonial era building. That few question its authenticity is a testament to how much Alexandria citizens and visitors want to have a tangible link to the eighteenth century past of the city.

By most accounts Ramsay House is considered the oldest building in Alexandria and dates ascribed for its construction range from 1695 to 1751.¹ Its reputation as the oldest house was well established by the early twentieth century.² Indeed, the building was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey, a part of the National Park Service, in 1936 with both measured drawings and photographs. It was originally the home of William Ramsay, one of the founding trustees of Alexandria and a prosperous merchant.

In the first part of the twentieth century the building served variously as a

¹	Dates ascribed for the construction of Ramsay House:
Date	Source
1695	Milton Grigg, 1949 bicentennial edition of <i>Gazette</i>
1724	Program for dedication of building, 1956
pre-1732	<i>Gazette</i> article, 1947
1725	<i>Gazette</i> article, 1963
1748	Fundraising brochure, 1944
1751	<i>The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia</i> , 1928

The most definitive work on Alexandria architecture, Ethelyn Cox's *Historic Alexandria Street by Street, A Survey of Existing Early Buildings*, sidesteps the issue and diplomatically notes: "A 1956 reconstruction, based on early photographs of the house of William Ramsay..." Another standard work on Alexandria notes that Ramsay House is "reputed to be Alexandria's earliest structure..." William Francis Smith and T. Michael Miller, *A Seaport Saga, Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia*, (Norfolk, Virginia, The Donning Company, 1989), p.128.

² Mary G. Powell, *The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia from July 13, 1749 to May 24, 1861*, originally published in 1928. Reprinted with a new index by Wesley Pippenger (Westminster, Maryland, Family Line Publications, 1995), p.170.

